WOOD SMOKE AND RUNNING WATER

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HV3555
.L81 1927

AMERICAN FOUNDATION
FOR THE BLIND INC.

OUTDOOR AMERICA
JAN. 1927

Wood Smoke *and* Running Water

As you read this magnificent tribute to our out-of-doors, try to remember that the author is totally blind and that this vivid word picture is painted from memory

By CHARLES LOSE

HV 2335
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Dry point etchings by the well-known British artist, Norman Wilkinson

TWO boys had made a camp at the end of a great boulder that stood at the edge of the stream. Their roof was a dozen slabs leaned against the boulder. Their bed was of hemlock twigs piled in a tumbled mass. Their camp was somewhat protected from the wind at the rear by a steep hillside. On a beach of sand and gravel at the front, their camp fire burned. It would light up the face of the pool at night and the trunks of the trees on the opposite shore.

The pool was perhaps a hundred feet in length. It was deep at the upper end, but wide and shallow at the lower end. At the head there was a noisy riffle, and at the foot, one with a lower, deeper note. A second boulder lay in the middle of the pool, just in front of the boys' camp. It made a harbor for the trout. Its top rose above the surface of the water and divided the current. The stream, as it ran past this boulder, made a soft swishing sound, now high, now low.

It was the opening day of the trout season, a gray day with a cold wind. The stream, in which the boys had been wading in ordinary shoes all day, was ice cold, for the snow was not yet gone from the deeper hollows in the mountains. The night was sure to be cold. Ice would form around the edges of the pool. The boys had no change of clothing, so far as I could see, and no covering for their bed. Yet, when I asked them to go with me down to the club house, a mile below, where there were warm stoves and spare beds, they declined my invitation. The older boy, a lad of about thirteen, told me, with some little show of embarrassment, the reason. He said he liked to smell the smoke from the camp fire and listen to the running water.

In the night I was awakened by a high wind. It shook the club house and made its joints creak. I could hear it roaring on the ridges like a gale at sea. As I snuggled down lower among my warm blankets I thought of the two boys in their open camp. But the next morning when

I hailed them from across the stream and asked them what sort of a night they had spent, one said "Great" and the other said "Bully."

It was two months later that I met the old fisherman some five miles higher up on the stream. His camp was made under two small oaks whose branches met and made a green canopy overhead. His shelter was a square of canvas hardly larger than a bed sheet. It was stretched low between the two oaks in front and pinned to the ground behind. The bed was of sweet fern, dry and aromatic. At the rear of the camp there was an open space of twenty-five or thirty acres, known to fishermen as "the field." In it ferns, huckleberry bushes, and red wood lilies grew and aspens quivered in the lightest breath of wind. There was a tall mountain across the stream in front of the camp. It had been ravaged by lumbermen and scourged by forest fires until it was only a great mass of gray rocks and rock ledges with here and there a clump of bushes like tufts of beard on an old man's face. But in the early morning light or after the sun had sunk behind the rim of mountains it would have a beauty and a dignity all its own.

The stream at this point ran down a long incline so uniform in width and depth that it might have been flowing down a gently sloping street. It was paved with stones, with now and then a larger stone around which the water gurgled, and below which there was always a little trout that rose at short intervals to capture a floating insect. On the farther side the stream was bordered with thick bushes, some of whose branches leaned over and touched the water and made a lapping sound as they moved slowly back and forth. These overhanging branches made a sanctuary for the larger trout. On the nearer side the stream was lined with tall grass among which the moving water made soft, low, whispering sounds. It was a place that would have made a strong appeal to the heart of every true angler and camper.

It was near the close of a perfect June day that I came upon the old fisherman. He was in the middle of the stream in front of his camp with rod in hand. I sat down on the bank to watch him. Soon I saw a ten inch trout rise to one of his two flies. He hooked and netted it with all the skill and precision of the complete angler. Then, for some reason, he stood still in the stream. Trout splashed unheeded all about him, the stream called to him as it went by, wood smoke drifted out to him from his camp fire, a soft wind moved among the leaves, and high overhead night hawks wheeled and mounted with sharp cries. Then, a whip-poor-will fluttered down to a flat stone not far away and began its shrill lament. Still, the old fisherman made no movement. Of what was he thinking? Was he dreaming of the days when he and the stream were both young, when the mountain side was covered and the valley was filled with murmuring pines and hemlocks, when streams ran clear and clean and full, and when trout were many and fishermen few? Or was he peering into the future and counting with keen regret the few such June evenings left for him? I could not tell.

I spent the night with the old man. Sometime after midnight I was roused by a long roll of thunder. I listened and found that a storm was coming up the valley. Soon it was so near that the brilliant flashes of lightning made everything light as day and the deep peals of thunder fairly shook the mountains. Between thunder peals it was deathly still, and I could hear the stream talking excitedly to itself for rods up and down. Then I heard the rain coming with its millions of pattering feet, and in a minute it was on us with a deafening roar. But the old man at my side did not awake. He edged a little closer to me, but his deep regular breathing went on steadily. His old body had long known thunder and lightning and rain and was not to be disturbed by them. Finally the storm passed and left behind it air so cool and moist and earth so clean and fragrant that one must know the mountains after a thunderstorm to understand.

In the morning as I was putting my rod together and preparing to depart I asked the (*Continued on page 65*)

Bang! A flash and a strike.

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old man what his age was. He replied that he was eighty-three and added that for more than fifty years he had spent some part of each June in camp along the stream. I asked him why he came to that lonely place in the heart of the mountains. His answer was almost identical, word for word, with that of the boy at the boulder. Seventy years, a long lifetime, separated the young boy from the old man, yet both were impelled by the same desire, to smell wood smoke and hear running water. I know of few other worldly interests that last so long as this one does, are so absorbing, so wholesome, so worthwhile. Is it an inheritance from our nomadic ancestors who led their flocks to running water and slept by camp fires?

There is much trout water in our Northern Alleghenies. In the bottom of each mountain valley there runs a trout stream. Some of these streams are large, little rivers, the homes of the big trout. Some of these streams are small, tributaries to tributaries, the birth places and the homes of the little trout. Most of them head far back in the mountains, in the wild places. On their way out they loiter through the swamps, leap over shelves of rock into deep dark pools, race down the riffles and loaf through the level stretches, and dig deep holes under the bank and the roots of the trees to make hiding places for the trout. They run through the woods, past little clearings and lonely farm houses, over old mill dams and under covered wooden bridges. Each stream has a voice distinctly its own and familiar only to the fisherman. One is a noisy brawler in its swift descent of white water among the rocks. Another is a whisperer among the grasses in the meadow. One complains that it is made to hurry while another goes laughing and singing on its way to join the brimming river. But in one thing these streams are all alike—they are running water, swift, alive, sparkling. As they hurry past the fisherman they beckon him on to the next bend and then to the next, around which there is always a new pool and a new picture waiting for him.

Each of these streams has its scores of fishermen on the opening day of the trout season. Some of these fishermen will stop when noon comes to build a little fire in a safe place on a flat rock near the water, or on a stony beach. Over their little fire they will boil a cup of coffee and perhaps, broil a trout. They will smell wood smoke and hear running water. Then they will carefully tramp out their fire and go on to the end of the day. For some of these men this opening day, with one or two more like it will be their only outing for a year. But it will suffice. On nights when sleep forsakes them they will go over in their minds, step by step, and detail by detail, from the pink dawn until the time of the evening

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star, the events of these wonderful days, and then they will turn over and go to sleep. Or when great worry depresses them, or hard work fatigues them almost beyond endurance, they will close their eyes to the walls of brick and mortar all about them and their ears to the discordant noises of shop and mill and street. Again they will see a gray mountainside and a shining stream running along its foot. Again they will hear the splash of trout and the vesper song of the Wilson thrush. Again sweet wood smoke will be in their nostrils and the sound of running water in their ears. Then their backs will straighten, their shoulders will square, and they will be filled with new courage —a courage born of the mountain and the stream.

The Izaak Walton League has a number of great purposes, but the greatest of these is to save the streams, not only for the men that go fishing, but for the thousands of others that love the outdoors. In the last fifty years I have seen many fine streams despoiled by the greed and the indifference of men, their fish killed and their natural beauty destroyed. Streams that should have been things of beauty and a joy forever, have become things of ugliness and a reproach forever. I have seen so much of this that I finally despaired that things were ever to be better. Now I have pinned my faith to the Izaak Walton League. If it should fail, all hope is gone. But it will not fail, it must not fail. Sorry will be the day when men cease to know and love the smell of wood smoke and the sound of running water.

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